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Language and a Continent in Flux: Twenty-First Century Tensions of Inclusion and Exclusion

Philip McDermott and Sarah McMonagle

Abstract

This article introduces the present forum edition on linguistic identities in twenty-first-century Europe. We consider how discourses of inclusion and exclusion, embedded in discourses of the nation, continue to be relevant in understanding and interpreting the social, cultural and political status of (minority) languages and their speakers. In order to introduce the various studies that comprise this forum, we relay how language debates provide a lens through which wider systems of prestige and hierarchy may be focused. Such debates can, at one and the same time, both alter and reflect the meanings and interpretations of Europe itself.

Key Words: Europe, globalisation, identity, language, linguistic minorities, nation, nationalism

Introduction

As the twentieth century was drawing to a close, esteemed British historian Eric Hobsbawm noted, ‘The owl of Minerva which brings wisdom flies out at dusk. It’s a good sign it’s now circling around nations and nationalism’ (1990: 183). Hobsbawm considered it implausible that the period in which he was writing and moving into the twenty-first century could be described

in terms of ‘nations’ and ‘nationalism’, as the globe was being reorganised according to supranational structures (1990: 182). However, the collapse of communism and resurgence of nationalism in central and eastern Europe in the 1990s quickly put paid to the assertion that nations might be a thing of the past. Yet Hobsbawm’s highly influential work *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* was far from redundant. If anything, Hobsbawm’s enquiry into the question of nationalism as well as his scholarly illustrations of how ‘politics, technology, and social transformation’ (10) drive this ideology serve to explain how the idea of the ‘nation’ is often applied to suit different political interests.¹ At the same time, many of those ‘newly’ independent nations of the late twentieth century sought to enter the supranational fold of the European Union in the early part of the twenty-first century.

The European Union, throughout its many phases in history, represents a particular, institutional conceptualisation of Europe. Europe itself – as a cultural, political, economic and social entity – has always been in flux. The redrawing of borders and the movement of people and changing political dynamics are synonymous with the very idea of what is ‘within’ and what is ‘without’ Europe, what is imposed from the ‘top down’ and how it is negotiated from the ‘bottom up’. Such questions, although clearly not new, are as relevant as ever for the twenty-first century, which sees tensions between the forces of globalisation and more parochial forms of nationalism, where supranational institutions are challenged by nationalism in the west and where the fluidity of ‘superdiverse’ conditions (Vertovec 2007) and postmodern identities are pitted against more hardened discourses of monocultural belonging rooted in a particular place.

Languages provide a prism through which we can understand these changes, contradictions and dialectics of twenty-first-century Europe. More precisely, our affinities to the language(s) that we speak, the way in which we consider the languages of other groups and their

speakers and how we use language in various contexts provide a means through which we can understand ideological shifts, economic and demographic change and the nature of rooted concepts like place, region and nation. After all, language is not merely a medium of communication but rather a mechanism of power depending on one's relational position in a given social space (Bourdieu 1982).

In the 'national' space, cultural capital lies with speakers of the so-called national language – usually a variety that has been elevated and standardised for purposes of group sovereignty and unification. Anderson (2006 [1983]: 68) describes an '*eng*-European conception of nation-ness linked to a private-property language'. Yet national and linguistic borders can only ever represent rough approximations of one another. Nation-states in Europe are also home to historical and autochthonous language communities, while in-migration – both historical and contemporary – alters the linguistic landscapes of not only nation-states but also regions and cities, which have their own particular dynamics. 'National' languages and their speakers enjoy especially privileged positions in (and despite) culturally diverse constellations.

'Other' languages, such as those of the migrant, are thereby positioned lower in social and cultural hierarchies, their authenticity in the 'national' space questioned (McDermott 2011). Their positioning thus relates to either non- or 'mis-recognition' (cf. McDermott 2017; Nic Craith 2006: 59). Language debates, therefore, provide a central means through which to expose realities of difference and flux, to instigate change and alter the meanings and interpretations of Europe itself. It is these complex debates that form the central themes in this forum on 'Linguistic Identities in 21st-Century Europe: Issues, Challenges and Prospects' and are illuminated by each of the pieces in this edition.

In this introductory piece, we consider some of the key themes that emerge in and across the various studies on the Basque Country, Georgia, Germany, Northern Ireland, and Portugal. Each discussion piece illustrates dynamics of belonging and exclusion, which may be either based on or negotiated through language use and the wider symbolic connections with cultural identity. Below we briefly consider how these themes have relevance in the contemporary context of Europe. Each discussion piece in this forum has been authored or first authored by an early career researcher. Although this presents an opportunity for such researchers to clarify the ideas and assess the theories with which they are working, we see an even more important opportunity here for readers to review contemporary issues of language diversity in Europe through the work of new scholars. Also, forum pieces are *discussion pieces*, designed to present and consider issues surrounding particular topics; they are by no means exhaustive. Where readers are not familiar with a thematic area or linguistic context, the forum pieces provide an overview of and some fundamental insights to that context. For readers with scholarly experience of the presented topics, there is an opportunity for reflection as each of the authors ‘takes stock’ of contemporary issues surrounding linguistic identities against ongoing policy and discursive challenges. In each piece we see how wider global trends have direct relevance on the constellations of power and legitimacy at the local level.

Language Dynamics, Hierarchies and the Quest for Recognition: Studies from Across Europe

The forum begins with two pieces on identity and authenticity and how they may be negotiated in autochthonous settings. Ricardo Rivera (Berkeley) explores the role of language in negotiating and establishing a Muslim identity in contemporary Georgia. Following the collapse of the USSR, Orthodox Christianity was considered a central element of Georgian national identity.

What, then, for other religious and ethnic minorities who act and feel Georgian? Rivera describes contemporary translation practices as a site for negotiating a hybrid Muslim-Georgian identity in the region of Adjara as well as the potential for cultural and literal mistranslation that can occur in this process.

Hanna Lantto (Turku) then shifts our attention from the eastern periphery to the western perimeter of Europe, namely to the Basque Country. Whereas marginalisation of Basque in the Spanish state has overcome many hurdles, contemporary learners and speakers of this language often face folk linguistic charges of being 'inauthentic'. The narratives of two 'types' of Basque speaker show, however, how they negotiate their linguistic identities in relation to the changing political and educational dynamics of the Basque Country since linguistic *normalisation*. Moreover, these active speakers highlight the dynamic nature of language by pointing to a variety of Basque that might be developing in urban contexts.

Freya Stancombe Taylor (Ulster) describes the very real consequences of clashes over linguistic identities in areas of ethno-political conflict (cf. McMonagle and McDermott 2014). She takes the current political impasse in Northern Ireland – precipitated by the demands for legal recognition of the Irish language there – to reveal the limits of political discourses on language in a supposedly postconflict society. She details the extent of linguistic diversity in the region of Northern Ireland, how this does not fully correspond to the competing narratives of national belonging that define the political agenda there and pleads for broader considerations of linguistic identities in processes of reconciliation.

While Stancombe Taylor highlights the role of migrant languages in a diversifying Northern Ireland, the final two contributions in this forum consider the misrecognition of migrant languages and their speakers via a 'normed' national lens and conveyed in popular and

educational discourses. In their contribution, Rühlmann and McMonagle (Hamburg) describe how the dynamics of discourse in Germany ascribe particular identities (usually in terms of lack of competence) to migrants as well as to those who are perceived to not 'belong' – the *Other*. A major challenge concerning political and academic discourses in Germany are the taboos surrounding 'racism' there. The authors call for a critical race perspective to be introduced to better understand the experiences of plurilingual people of migrant background.

Finally, Nikolett Szelei (Lisbon) considers levels of language diversity in Portugal and how they remain hidden in classrooms and educational policy. As is common in many European countries, educational policies fail to recognise the complexity of students' linguistic repertoires and identities. Szelei reflects on the manner in which multilingualism in Portugal is interpreted and argues that multilingualism should not be considered an exotic novelty but something that is part of Portugal's collective history. Such acknowledgement may then allow adequate and responsive educational policies to be developed and implemented.

Conclusion

In twenty-first-century Europe, macroprocesses such as globalisation and nationalism shape and mould how we continue to perceive and consider languages. The discussion pieces in this forum indicate that the centrality of the 'nation' is, for now, unbudgeable in top-down processes of recognition. This has clear ramifications for cultural minorities (both autochthonous and allochthonous, real and perceived), as the discourse of nation has 'prioritised' ideas such as the 'national language', which results in the 'othering' of the languages of minority groups. However, even under conditions where some languages are prioritised over others, the resilience

of linguistic communities prevails, as was traditionally the case, through grassroots organisation that provide a reactive force in the face of opposition.

Languages, therefore, provide an important means through which processes of globalisation – and not just nationalism – can be interpreted, critiqued and understood, and the articles in this forum edition explore many of these key themes. Whereas each piece in this forum operationalises ‘language’ (both functional and affective) and ‘identity’ (whether affirmed or ascribed) differently, they all indicate that the centrality of the nation holds strong and that any predictions of its decline have been premature. However, at the time of writing, in a period of intensified nationalism, neither can we substantiate any claims that the influence of globalisation is waning; rather, this forum on linguistic identities in twenty-first-century Europe and each of the pieces within it highlight issues of belonging, the challenges of negotiating belonging in given structures and discourses and prospects of recognition amidst the influence of both global and local forces.

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Notes

¹ It should also be noted that Hobsbawm updated the second edition of *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* to take into account socio-political events of the 1990s.